

The new foreign policy

During the Tudor period, from 1485 until 1603, English foreign policy changed several times. But by the end of the period England had established some basic principles. Henry VII had been careful to remain friendly with neighbouring countries. His son, Henry VIII, had been more ambitious, hoping to play an important part in European politics. He was unsuccessful. Mary allied England to Spain by her marriage. This was not only unpopular but was politically unwise: England had nothing to gain from being allied to a more powerful country. Elizabeth and her advisers considered trade the most important foreign policy matter, as Henry VII had done. For them whichever country was England's greatest trade rival was also its greatest enemy. This idea remained the basis of England's foreign policy until the nineteenth century.

Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII, had recognised the importance of trade and had built a large fleet of merchant ships. His son, Henry VIII, had spent money on warships and guns, making English guns the best in Europe.

Elizabeth's foreign policy carried Henry VII's work much further, encouraging merchant expansion. She correctly recognised Spain as her main trade rival and enemy. Spain at that time ruled the Netherlands, although many of the people were Protestant and were fighting for their independence from Catholic Spanish rule. Because Spain and France were rivals, Spanish soldiers could only reach the Netherlands from Spain by sea. This

meant sailing up the English Channel. Elizabeth helped the Dutch Protestants by allowing their ships to use English harbours from which they could attack Spanish ships, often with the help of the English. When it looked as if the Dutch rebels might be defeated, after they lost the city of Antwerp in 1585, Elizabeth agreed to help them with money and soldiers. It was almost an open declaration of war on Spain.

English ships had already been attacking Spanish ships as they returned from America loaded with silver and gold. This had been going on since about 1570, and was the result of Spain's refusal to allow England to trade freely with Spanish American colonies. Although these English ships were privately owned "privateers", the treasure was shared with the queen. Elizabeth apologised to Spain but kept her share of what had been taken from Spanish ships. Philip knew quite well that Elizabeth was encouraging the "sea dogs", as they were known. These seamen were traders as well as pirates and adventurers. The most famous of them were John Hawkins, Francis Drake and Martin Frobisher, but there were many others who were also trying to build English sea trade and to interrupt Spain's.

Philip decided to conquer England in 1587 because he believed this had to be done before he would be able to defeat the Dutch rebels in the Netherlands. He hoped that enough Catholics in England would be willing to help him. Philip's large army was already in the Netherlands. He built a great fleet of ships, an "Armada", to move his army across the

English Channel from the Netherlands. But in 1587 Francis Drake attacked and destroyed part of this fleet in Cadiz harbour.

Philip started again, and built the largest fleet that had ever gone to sea. But most of the ships were designed to carry soldiers, and the few fighting ships were not as good as the English ones. English ships were longer and narrower, so that they were faster, and their guns could also shoot further than the Spanish ones.

When news of this Armada reached England in summer 1588, Elizabeth called her soldiers together. She won their hearts with well-chosen words: "I am come . . . to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and my blood even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too."

The Spanish Armada was defeated more by bad weather than by English guns. Some Spanish ships were sunk, but most were blown northwards by the wind, many being wrecked on the rocky coasts of Scotland and Ireland. For England it was a glorious moment, but it did not lead to an end of the war with Spain, and England found itself

having to spend more than ever on England's defence. Peace was only made with Spain once Elizabeth was dead.

The new trading empire

Both before and after the Armada, Elizabeth followed two policies. She encouraged English sailors like John Hawkins and Francis Drake to continue to attack and destroy Spanish ships bringing gold, silver and other treasures back from the newly discovered continent of America. She also encouraged English traders to settle abroad and to create colonies. This second policy led directly to Britain's colonial empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first English colonists sailed to America towards the end of the century. One of the best known was Sir Walter Raleigh, who brought tobacco back to England. The settlers tried without success to start profitable colonies in Virginia, which was named after Elizabeth, the "virgin" or unmarried queen. But these were only beginnings.

England also began selling West African slaves to work for the Spanish in America. John Hawkins carried his first slave cargo in 1562. By 1650 slavery had become an important trade, bringing wealth

particularly to Bristol in southwest England. It took until the end of the eighteenth century for this trade to be ended.

This growth of trade abroad was not entirely new. The Merchant Adventurers Company had already been established with royal support before the end of the fifteenth century. During Elizabeth's reign more "chartered" companies, as they were known, were established. A "charter" gave a company the right to all the business in its particular trade or region. In return for this important advantage the chartered company gave some of its profits to the Crown. A number of these companies were established during Elizabeth's reign: the Eastland Company to trade with Scandinavia and the Baltic in 1579; the Levant Company to trade with the Ottoman Empire in 1581; the Africa Company to trade in slaves, in 1588; and the East India Company to trade with India in 1600.

The East India Company was established mainly because the Dutch controlled the entire spice trade with the East Indies (Indonesia). Spices were extremely important for making the winter salted meat tastier. The English were determined to have a share in this rich trade, but were unsuccessful. However, the East India Company did begin to operate in India, Persia and even in Japan, where it had a trading station from 1613–23. The quarrel over spices was England's first difficulty with the Dutch. Before the end of the seventeenth century trading competition with the Dutch had led to three wars.

Wales

Closer to home, the Tudors did their best to bring Wales, Ireland and Scotland under English control.

Henry VII was half Welsh. At the battle of Bosworth in 1485 Henry's flag was the red dragon of Wales. It had been the badge of the legendary last British (Welsh) king to fight against the Saxons. At the time, Caxton was printing Malory's poem *Morte d'Arthur*. Henry cleverly made the most of popular "Arthurian" interest to suggest that he was somehow connected with the ancient British king, and named his eldest son Arthur. He also brought many Welshmen to his court.

Arthur, Prince of Wales, died early and Henry's second son became Henry VIII. But he did not share his father's love of Wales. His interest was in power and authority, through direct control. He wanted the Welsh to become English.

One example of the changes Henry VIII made was in the matter of names. At that time the Welsh did not have family names. They used their own first name with those of their father and grandfather, using *ap*, which meant "son of". Names were long, and the English, who had been using family names for about three hundred years, found them difficult. From 1535 the English put pressure on the Welsh to use an English system of names by preventing Welsh names being used in law courts and on official papers. By 1750 the use of Welsh names had almost disappeared, although not before one Welshman had made a final and humorous protest.

He signed his name “Sion ap William ap Sion ap William ap Sion ap Dafydd ap Ithel Fychan as Cynrig ap Robert ap lowerth ap Rhyrid ap lowerth ap Madoc ap Ednawain Bendew, called after the English fashion John Jones.” Many Welsh people accepted wrong English ways of pronouncing their names. Others took their fathers’ first names and ap Richard, ap Robert, ap Hywel, ap Hugh soon became Pritchard, Probert, Powell and Pugh. Others who had not used “ap” were known as Williams, Thomas, Davies, Hughes and so on.

Between 1536 and 1543 Wales became joined to England under one administration. English law was now the only law for Wales. Local Welshmen were appointed as JPs, so that the Welsh gentry became part of the ruling English establishment. Those parts of Wales which had not been “shired” were now organised like English counties. Welshmen entered the English parliament. English became the only official language, and Welsh was soon only spoken in the hills. Although Welsh was not allowed as an official language, Henry VIII gave permission for a Welsh Bible to be printed, which became the basis on which the Welsh language survived.

Although most people gave up speaking Welsh, poets and singers continued to use it. The spoken word had remained the most important part of Welsh culture since the Saxon invasion. The introduction of schools, using English, almost destroyed this last fortress of Welsh culture. The gatherings of poets and singers, known as *eisteddfods*, which had been going on since 1170 suddenly stopped. But at the end of the eighteenth century, there were still a few who could speak Welsh. *Eisteddfods* began again, bringing back a tradition which still continues today.

Ireland

Henry VIII wanted to bring Ireland under his authority, as he had done with Wales. Earlier kings had allowed the powerful Anglo-Irish noble families to rule, but Henry destroyed their power. He persuaded the Irish parliament to recognise him as king of Ireland.

However, Henry also tried to make the Irish accept his English Church Reformation. But in Ireland, unlike England, the monasteries and the Church were still an important part of economic and social life. And the Irish nobility and gentry, unlike the English, felt it was too dangerous to take monastic land. They refused to touch it. When an Anglo-Irish noble rebelled against Henry VIII, he did so in the name of Catholicism. Henry VIII failed to get what he wanted in Ireland. In fact he made things worse by bringing Irish nationalism and Catholicism together against English rule.

It is possible that, without the danger of foreign invasion, the Tudors might have given up trying to control the Irish. But Ireland tempted Catholic Europe as a place from which to attack the English. In 1580, during Elizabeth I’s reign, many Irish rebelled, encouraged by the arrival of a few Spanish and French soldiers.

Queen Elizabeth’s soldiers saw the rebellious Irish population as wild and primitive people and treated them with great cruelty. Edmund Spenser, a famous Elizabethan poet, was secretary to the English commander. After the rebellion was defeated he wrote, “Out of every corner of the woods . . . they [the Irish rebels] came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs would not bear them. They looked like . . . death. They spoke like ghosts crying out of their graves. They did eat the dead . . . happy where they could find them.”

The Tudors fought four wars during the period to make the Irish accept their authority and their religion. In the end they destroyed the old Gaelic way of life and introduced English government.

Ireland became England’s first important colony. The effect of English rule was greatest in the north, in Ulster, where the Irish tribes had fought longest. Here, after the Tudor conquest, lands were taken and sold to English and Scottish merchants. The native Irish were forced to leave or to work for these settlers.

The Protestant settlers took most of the good land in Ulster. Even today most good land in Ulster is owned by Protestants, and most poor land by Catholics. The county of Derry in Ulster was taken

over by a group of London merchants and divided among the twelve main London guilds. The town of Derry was renamed Londonderry, after its new merchant owners. This colonisation did not make England richer, but it destroyed much of Ireland's society and economy. It also laid the foundations for war between Protestants and Catholics in Ulster in the second half of the twentieth century.

Scotland and England

The Scottish monarchs tried to introduce the same kind of centralised monarchy that the Tudors had so successfully developed in England. But it was much harder, because the Scottish economy was weaker, and Scottish society more lawless. However, James IV, James V, Mary who was executed by her cousin Elizabeth of England, and her son James VI made important steps forward. They tried to control the lawless border country with England, and the disobedient Highland clans in the north. For the Scottish kings there was always a problem. The most disobedient were often the best fighters, and no king wanted to make enemies of those who might help him in battle against the English.

Knowing how weak they were, the Scottish kings usually avoided war with England. They made a peace treaty with Henry VII, the first with an English king since 1328, and James IV married Henry's daughter Margaret. But Henry VIII still wanted Scotland to accept his authority. In 1513 his army destroyed the Scottish army at Flodden. It was the worst defeat the Scots ever experienced. James himself was killed, and with him over twenty Scottish nobles.

The battle of Flodden increased the disagreement between those Scottish nobles who felt that Scotland should move towards a closer friendship with England and those who wanted to remain loyal to the Auld Alliance with France. The Scottish monarch had to find a balance between these two, to keep both his nobles and his neighbours happy. The Protestant Reformation in Europe, and particularly in England, also increased the uncertainty and danger. There was talk of a

Catholic invasion of England by France and Spain. Many Scots wanted to stay on the side of Catholic Europe in the hope of sharing the fruits of a Catholic invasion of England.

But Henry VIII reminded the Scots that it was dangerous to work against him. He sent another army into Scotland to make the Scottish James V accept his authority. James's army was badly defeated and James himself died shortly after. Henry hoped to marry his son Edward to the baby Queen of Scots, Mary, and in this way join the two countries together under an English king. An agreement was reached in 1543.

Ordinary Scots were most unhappy at the idea of being ruled by England. In spite of their fear of the powerful English armies, a new Scottish parliament, aware of popular feeling, turned down the marriage agreement. For the next two years English soldiers punished them by burning and destroying the houses of southern Scotland. Rather than give little Mary to the English, the Scots sent her to France, where she married the French king's son in 1558.

Mary Queen of Scots and the Scottish Reformation

Mary was troubled by bad luck and wrong decisions. She returned to Scotland as both queen and widow in 1561. She was Catholic, but during her time in France Scotland had become officially and popularly Protestant.

The Scottish nobles who supported friendship with England had welcomed Protestantism for both political and economic reasons. The new religion brought Scotland closer to England than France. Financially, the Scottish monarch could take over the great wealth of the Church in Scotland and this would almost certainly mean awards of land to the nobles. The yearly income of the Church in Scotland had been twice that of the monarch.

Unlike the English, however, the Scots were careful not to give the monarch authority over the new Protestant Scottish "Kirk", as the Church in Scotland was called. This was possible because the Reformation took place while the queen, Mary, was

not in Scotland, and unable to interfere. The new Kirk was a far more democratic organisation than the English Church, because it had no bishops and was governed by a General Assembly. The Kirk taught the importance of personal belief and the study of the Bible, and this led quickly to the idea that education was important for everyone in Scotland. As a result most Scots remained better educated than other Europeans, including the English, until the end of the nineteenth century.

Protestantism had spread quickly through the Scottish universities, which were closely connected to those in Germany and Scandinavia. The new Kirk in Scotland disliked Mary and her French Catholicism. Mary was careful not to give the Kirk any reason for actually opposing her. She made it clear she would not try to bring back Catholicism.

Mary was soon married again, to Lord Darnley, a 'Scottish Catholic'. But when she tired of him, she allowed herself to agree to his murder and married the murderer, Bothwell. Scottish society, in spite of its lawlessness, was shocked. The English government did not look forward to the possibility of Mary succeeding Elizabeth as queen. In addition to her Catholicism and her strong French culture, she had shown very poor judgement. By her behaviour Mary probably destroyed her chance of inheriting the English throne. She found herself at war with her Scottish opponents, and was soon captured and imprisoned. However, in 1568 she escaped to England, where she was held by Elizabeth for nineteen years before she was finally executed.

A Scottish king for England

Mary's son, James VI, started to rule at the age of twelve in 1578. He showed great skill from an early age. He knew that if he behaved correctly he could expect to inherit the English throne after Elizabeth's death, as he was her closest relative. He also knew that a Catholic alliance between Spain and France might lead to an invasion of England so he knew he had to remain friendly with them too. He managed to "face both ways", while remaining publicly the Protestant ally of England.

James VI is remembered as a weak man and a bad decision-maker. But this was not true while he was king only in Scotland. Early in his reign, in the last years of the sixteenth century, he rebuilt the authority of the Scottish Crown after the disasters which had happened to his mother, grandfather and great-grandfather. He brought the Catholic and Protestant nobles and also the Kirk more or less under royal control. These were the successes of an extremely clever diplomat. Like the Tudors, he was a firm believer in the authority of the Crown, and like them he worked with small councils of ministers, rather than Parliament. But he did not have the money or military power of the Tudors.

James VI's greatest success was in gaining the English throne when Elizabeth died in 1603 at the unusually old age of 70. If Elizabeth's advisers had had serious doubts about James as a suitable Protestant ruler, they would probably have tried to find another successor to Elizabeth. Few in England could have liked the idea of a new king coming from Scotland, their wild northern neighbour. The fact that England accepted him suggests that its leading statesmen had confidence in James's skills.